Anchoring religious change :
Faces of power and problems of communication

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Introduction'

Religious practices and preferences changed markedly throughout Roman history, yet at the same time, the ancient Roman world was dominated by tradition. A well-known characteristic of Roman morality was that people ought to behave according to *mos maiorum*. Innovation was suspect. Any literary, architectural and religious innovations were argued away by claims that they were in fact a return to ancestral customs.¹ There is, however, an apparent contradiction between the idea of an ever-adapting religious ‘market’ which caters for both permanent niches and changing tastes, and a mental framework which strongly emphasises a ‘proper’ ancestral way of doing things.²

¹ Different versions of the paper were presented at the Graduiertenschule für Geisteswissenschaften Göttingen, and the University of Pavia. I am grateful to the audiences at both occasions for their comments and criticism, which has much improved the argument. This on-line version has retained much of the form of a lecture, with rather minimal annotation. A more detailed published version will appear in due course.

Indeed, many religious cults which were well-established in the Roman imperial period, such as those of Isis, Magna Mater, or Mithras, had at one stage or another – rightly or wrongly – been perceived as foreign imports and took their time in finding a place within Roman society. Not all of them managed to become socially acceptable members of the Roman pantheon.

This paper focuses on the apparent paradox between the historical reality of continuous developments in religious practices (and probably beliefs) and the equally continuous importance of maintaining that matters stayed the same. It will do so by looking primarily at ‘the way [in which] religion [is] referred to and constituted in communication’; one of the three perspectives proposed by Jörg Rüpke in an insightful recent article on historical religion and religious transformation. It will suggest that a systematic analysis of the relation between exercising power and religious innovation is helpful to solve the paradox, and that an important concept within that analysis is ‘anchoring’. Ultimately, religious changes that were most easily ‘anchored’ in changing traditions were the most successful ones.

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Communication, context and perceptions

‘I shouldn’t know you again if we did meet’, Humpty Dumpty replied in a discontented tone, giving her one of his fingers to shake: ‘you’re so exactly like other people’

‘The face is what one goes by, generally’, Alice remarked in a thoughtful tone.

‘That’s just what I complain of’, said Humpty Dumpty. ‘Your face is the same as everybody has – the two eyes, so — ’ (marking their places in the air with his thumb) ‘nose in the middle, mouth under. It’s always the same. Now if you had two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance – or the mouth at the top – that would be some help’.  

This may be a somewhat unexpected authority to use as the basis for a discussion of problems of understanding. Yet, this justly famous quote makes clear that it is probably easier to misunderstand each other than to get the right message across. This is sobering thought. Communication is, as Humpty Dumpty’s citation shows, never a straightforward process. Most people, reading Through the Looking Glass, will side with Alice and allow that faces are generally speaking useful to go by if one is to recognise people. But there is no denying that Humpty Dumpty has a point too: An image needs to be recognisable, if it is to make any sense at all. And his comment, that all those human faces are exactly the same, draws attention to one of the crucial problems in communicating any image: you just don’t know for sure what your audience is going to see. What may be completely self-evident to one, might be a baffling mystery to another.

5 Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass (London 1871).
Humpty Dumpty and Alice may be illustrative at a second level that is relevant to this paper. These are Humpty Dumpty’s last words to Alice, and as in their entire earlier conversation, the aim seems to be to place his understanding and his meaning of words over hers. In fact, he does so quite explicitly earlier in their verbal exchange:

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master — that's all.' 6

This is, of course, an extreme case of attempting to establish a dominant position through the use of language. One could, however, argue that it is not an example of doing so through communication. Humpty Dumpty expresses himself through a use of terminology which is so radically different from that of Alice that he cannot expect her to understand him – something he may not be very interested in anyhow.

Where Humpty Dumpty may have had a point about the similarities of human faces from the point of view of an ‘eggish’ observer, he must surely be wrong when arguing that words can mean just what he chooses them to mean. Or rather, in establishing such linguistic dominance, he loses the possibility of actually being able to influence Alice's actions or clarify his position. Without a shared terminology – and a shared system of reference – it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to make a point.

6 Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass.*
Faces of power and a shared field of experience

Such shared terminology (at least within a common group) is often assumed, but rarely defined. So this paper will spend some time on clarifying its terminology to create a useful basis for communication and discussion.

Firstly, the statement that using words in ways which are unlikely to be understood by the intended audience comes at the cost of being able to influence that audience. This adheres closely to the probably most-used definition of the process of exercising power. Robert Dahl, in a seminal 1957 article, wrote famously: “A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do”. The methods for A to get B to do so include physical constraint and coercion, but also persuasion. This has become known as the first dimension, or the first face, of power.

By implication, there are more faces of power. A second face, linked to the names of Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, includes non-decisions into the process of exercising power and is known as agenda-setting power:

… the researcher … would begin by investigating the particular “mobilization of bias” in the institution under scrutiny. Then, having analyzed the dominant values, the myths and the established political procedures and rules of the game, he would make a careful inquiry into which persons or groups, if any, gain from the existing bias and which, if any, are handicapped by it. Next, he would investigate the dynamics of non decision-making; that is, he would examine the extent to which and the manner in which the status quo oriented persons and groups

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influence those community values and those political institutions ... which tend to limit the scope of actual decision-making to “safe” issues.  

Bachrach and Baratz effectively argue that power may have already been in play before A has to get B to do something. Through what they call the ‘mobilization of bias’ certain notions or perspectives never come to the fore. A is so clearly in the dominant position, that B does not even make a demand upon A, which means A does not have to take action to get B not to do something he had originally wanted to.

A third face, also known as ideological power, was introduced by Steven Lukes in the 1970’s, and focuses attention on culturally influenced collective behavior. According to Lukes:

...A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have - that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?

Following the work from Michel Foucault, there are also reference to a ‘fourth face of power’, which is a ‘performative power’ that reshapes reality as it exists in relationships and in the link between power and knowledge. This is a different mode of thinking about power, which this paper will not touch upon further.

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10 P.E. Digeser, ‘The fourth face of power’, The Journal of Politics 54 (1992), 977-1007: ‘The first three faces agree at some level that A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B’s interests…: the As and B’s are taken as given. In contrast, the fourth face of power does not take as
When talking about ‘power and communication’, defining how power can be exercised is a necessary first step. Yet communication, too, was shown not to be a straightforward process. To communicate any notions through which power can be expressed – or indeed constructed – there is the need for a shared terminology. So, secondly (following the different definitions of power), it is necessary to indicate how without a shared terminology it becomes near-impossible to make a point. This follows the well-known model of communication as formulated by Wilbur Schramm in the 1950’s. He argued that any analysis of communication ought to include the way a message is received by, and has effect upon, the target of the message – the so-called feed-back loop. It is, furthermore, only possible for a recipient of a message to decode the meaning of the sender, when there is a shared field of experience. When decoding of a message is impossible, there cannot be communication. 11 This entire process is an elaboration on the 1949 Shannon-Weaver model (see figure 1) which described the major dimensions through which communication becomes possible at all: What is communicated? (message), by whom? (encoder or sender), how? (channel or medium), and to whom? (decoder or receiver).

presupposed the subjects (the A’s and B’s) of the other three faces ... Power postulates that subjectivity or individuality is not biologically given. Subjects are understood as social constructions, whose formation can be historically described'.

Returning briefly to Humpty-Dumpty’s idiosyncratic mode of formulation: because there is no shared field of experience, it becomes impossible for Alice to decode the message which she heard Humpty-Dumpty speak, which in turn created a situation in which rather than doing whatever Humpty-Dumpty may have wanted her to do (for instance, accepting some of the more outlandish points he was trying to make) Alice simply walked away. Where there is a shared field of experience, communication becomes possible, and with it persuasion or coercion – and thus the exercise of power.

**Communicating power an religious change**

Establishing definitions from the outset is a useful practice in itself. Yet the notions implied in the definitions above are also directly relevant for the purposes of this paper. When discussing ‘power and religious change’, surely the question should be relevant whether, for instance, distribution of new religious practices is a form of exercising power – that is, becoming involved in a new cult is what those with power want those with less power to do (or not do) – or a side-effect of exercising power – that is, getting those with less power to accept the dominance of those with more power leads to involvement in a new cult, but that is not the purpose in itself – or
indeed a way of communicating power – by publicly advertising their involvement in a new cult (or not) those with more power stress their superiority.

Similarly, if one accepts the importance of a shared field of experience, that should have serious repercussions for the way we think about the modes in which notions of religious change – or, more precisely, changed notions of religion – could be distributed. After all, communication would be impossible if a message were wholly alien to the target audience; the relevance of which should be self-evident when discussing the functioning and development of so-called foreign cults, or their use in propagating power through politics. This of course relates closely to the above-mentioned tendency to ‘translate a new religious phenomenon into terms of the familiar’.12

*Anchoring power*

One final conceptual notion needs to be clear before coming to the historical contents. That is the notion of ‘anchoring’. In psychology this concept describes a subconscious phenomenon regarding the way in which people make estimates. Individuals work from suggested reference points (‘anchors’) and then reach estimates through incremental adjustments by including additional information. In the words of Tversky and Kahneman, who coined the concept:

> In many situations, people make estimates by starting from an initial value that is adjusted to yield the final answer. The initial value, or starting point, may be suggested by the formulation of the problem, or it may be

the result of a partial computation. In either case, adjustments are typically insufficient.\textsuperscript{13}

This concept is now developed further within the new research agenda ‘Anchoring innovation’ by OIKOS, the National Research School in Classical Studies, the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{14} In doing so, the concept is used to describe a broader mental process that gives people cognitive footholds to adapt to new contexts. In this interpretation, certain types of terminology, concepts or images are seen as anchors that affect later perceptions and decisions. Since new developments need to be connected to what people expect, value and understand, such anchors can aid the conceptualisation and communication of ideas and notions, which then become firmly entrenched in the public mind as commonly accepted knowledge. Importantly, also, as the quote above shows, adjustments from anchors are typically insufficient. This gives the initial anchor enormous influence over later estimates.

For instance, thinking for a moment in political rather than religious terms, the use of the term \textit{princeps} by the first Roman emperor made this Republican office the starting point from which people thought about emperorship, allowing the new political landscape to become more easily entrenched in the perceptions of the Roman subjects. The use of the term was neither ‘invention of tradition’ nor ‘a Republican façade’ but a way of understanding political change by anchoring it in a traditional framework. Likewise, the continuous use and re-interpretation of the term


\textsuperscript{14} It is being developed with the financial support of Leiden University, Radboud University, the University of Amsterdam and the University of Groningen. For the concept of “anchoring”, see the website: \url{http://www.ru.nl/oikos/anchoring-innovation/} under further reading.
*res publica*, as analysed by Claudia Moatti, may have been a mode to adapt to the various revolutions and ruptures in Roman society.\(^{15}\)

Yet, how can these various notions be applied in practice? Examples tend to exemplify, and the remainder of this paper will sketch three more or less exemplary scenarios in which (perhaps inadequately called) ‘new religious notions’ are communicated, and perhaps anchored in society, through the exercise of power. The scenarios will pay particular attention to the role of the ‘by whom’, ‘how’, and ‘to whom’ questions – and to the importance of a shared field of experience. Each of the scenarios will take one of the three faces of power as a starting point.

*The first face of power*

A fairly clear example of a ‘first-face’ way of exercising power (to get someone, or a group, to do something that he, or they, would not otherwise do) can be seen during the short-lived reign of the emperor Bassianus, better known – of course – as Elagabalus. This somewhat idiosyncratic emperor attempted to dethrone Jupiter as the chief Roman deity to the benefit of a little known eastern god named Elagabalus, who was worshipped in the form of a conical black stone. The reign and religious notions of the young emperor himself have fairly recently been expertly analysed by Martijn Icks,\(^{16}\) allowing this paper to focus on how the actions of the young emperor can be played out as a scenario for exercising power in relation to religious change.

Under Elagabalus’ rule, there was a systematic and conscious attempt to elevate one specific god. Clearly, that the emperor wanted his people to do obedience

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to this god. Equally clearly, many of his people did not particularly want to do so. By exercising his power, then, the emperor forced many of his subjects to worship a god whom they would otherwise not have worshipped. The third-century author Herodian makes this very explicit:

[The emperor] directed all Roman officials who perform public sacrifices to call upon the new god Heliogabalus before all the other gods whom they invoke in their rites’. He goes on to state that, and again I quote: ‘Heliogabalus danced around the altars to music played on every kind of instrument; women from his own country accompanied him in these dances, carrying cymbals and drums as they circled the altars. The entire senate and all the knights stood watching, like spectators at the theatre (5.5.7).

This elevated position of the new supreme god is also mentioned by Herodian’s near-contemporary Cassius Dio, who stated: ‘The offence consisted, not in his introducing a foreign god into Rome or in his exalting him in very strange ways, but in his placing him even before Jupiter himself’ (79.11).

Ancient authors, with all their bias, are not our sole source for this information. The new god and his close relationship to the emperor were also emphasized through coinage. The conical stone was depicted on a substantial number of centrally minted coins, accompanied by the legend SACERD(OS) DEI SOLIS ELAGAB(ALI), SVMMVS SACERDOS AVG(VSTVS). Importantly, also, from AD 220 onwards the god is described as CONSERVATOR AVGVSTI:

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This was a function which Jupiter had traditionally held, but lost after 220, when he no longer figured on the emperor’s coinage at all.\textsuperscript{18}

Notably, the coins show the stone in a chariot, which fits another passage of Herodian:

\begin{quote}
A six-horse chariot bore the sun god, the horses huge and flawlessly white, with expensive gold fittings and rich ornaments. No one held the reins, and no one rode in the chariot; the vehicle was escorted as if the sun god himself were the charioteer… The people ran parallel to him, carrying torches and tossing garlands and flowers. The statues of all the gods, the costly or sacred offerings in the temples, the imperial ornaments, and valuable heirlooms were carried by the cavalry and the entire Praetorian Guard in honor of the sun god \textsuperscript{(5.6.7).}
\end{quote}

The passage clearly describes how the emperor actively promoted the new cult and expected his subjects to participate in it. The list of gruesome ends of those who thwarted the emperor in some of his other plans, at least in the texts of Herodian, Dio and the \textit{Historia Augusta}, makes it likely that the monarch was not beyond the threat of violence to convince people to act their parts.

As a ‘first face of power’-scenario, this is hopefully clear. The case of Elagabalus – god and emperor – is even more interesting for the purposed of this paper. There is some evidence that the emperor tried to generate a ‘shared field of experience’ before communicating his religious notions. The best case in point is the priestly costume in which the emperor is depicted on some of his coins, and which according to our literary sources he also wore in daily life:

RIC IV, Elagabalus, 86b (Au; 6.42 g).

The outfit as depicted has been studied in close detail by Lucinda Dirven, who has argued that it does not match any of the known Syrian priestly garments. Instead, she suggests it is either a Roman adaptation of the original dress, or a complete innovation – possibly designed with military appeal in mind. The Roman adaptation of this exotic costume is further strengthened by the way that ‘the novel phenomenon’ is presented ‘in a very traditional way’, with the emperor ‘depicted standing next to an altar, or in some cases a tripod, holding a patera in his right hand and a twig in his left’.19

Likewise, the earlier depicted reverse type with the black stone in a quadriga resembles earlier Augustan coin types, depicting modii of grain being similarly moved around

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In this way, one could argue, the emperor created a framework in which his new religious demands could be understood. One final passage of Herodian even suggests the conscious creation of a shared field of experience regarding his costume:

Since, however, [the emperor] wished the Senate and the Roman people to grow accustomed to seeing him in this costume and wished to test their reaction to this exotic sight, before he returned to Rome he had a full-length portrait painted, showing him performing his priestly duties in public. His native god also appeared in the painting; the emperor was depicted sacrificing to him under favorable auspices. Heliogabalus sent this picture to Rome to be hung in the centre of the Senate house, high above the statue of Victory … By the time the emperor came to Rome presenting the appearance described above, the Romans saw nothing unusual in it, for the painting had prepared them for what to expect (5.5.6-7).

The most straightforward shared field of experience, however, was never going to be between the emperor communicating this centralized message and the senates populusque romanus, but between the emperor and some of the inhabitants of eastern cities, where Elagabalus was a much better known deity. It is, then, hardly surprising
that these eastern cities are the only places where we can find some traces of the ways in which the imperial message was received by, and had effect upon, the target of that message. More or less simultaneously with the imperial directive, several of these eastern cities started minting coins depicting the black conical stone, and Martijn Icks has assembled a half-dozen other examples. In Altava and Attaleia (in Pamphylia), furthermore, there is even epigraphic evidence for the actual introduction of the cult, and in Sardes also for the celebration of Elagabalia – in honour of the god, not the emperor.20

It seems unlikely that these events were directly ordered by the emperor. A much more likely scenario is that these cities – many of which lie near or on the route which the young emperor took to get to Rome from Antioch – understood the centrally issued message, and reacted accordingly. The fact that Sardes received its third neokoros from Elagabalus may suggest that the emperor, in his turn, reacted to this reaction.21 If so, we have a perfect example of a ‘feed-back loop’. It would also show that not only force, but also the enticement of imperial appreciation allowed the emperor to get his subjects to do what they would not otherwise have done. One can communicate power without the threat of violence; particularly when religious change fits established patterns.

The second face of power

The first face of power, to all appearances, could be re-enacted through a fairly straightforward scenario. The second face much less so. How to demonstrate non-decisions, and the mobilisation of bias? A possibly scenario concerns the reign of Augustus with its emphasis on traditional divinities and qualities, and the relative

21 Icks, The Crimes of Elagabalus, 85-87
absence of new religious notions, let alone exotic ones, at the time. Indeed, where there was some sort of religious change – such as the re-institution of the *flamines* and the somewhat more debatable ‘re-institution’ of the *fetiales* – there was much emphasis on how traditional and typically Roman these innovations were. There seems to have been a fairly coherent set of ‘dominant values, myths and established political procedures and rules of the game’,\(^{22}\) and it is apparent that Augustus had to gain from this ‘existing bias’.

Clearly, the scenario cannot be pushed too far. After all, even if it can be usefully argued that Augustus’ emphasis on traditional roman religion can be seen as an attempt to mobilise bias, the attempt seems not to have been terribly successful. The first emperor’s 28 BC ban of the Egyptian rites within the *pomerium*, and its 21 BC extension by Agrippa to the area up to one Roman mile from the city, are very clear directives – showing the first face of power in full action.\(^{23}\)

However, it may well be useful to see Augustus’ measures as an attempt to adapt a shared field of experience and through it mobilise bias in a way that suited the new regime. Instead, such attempts are usefully placed within the context of identity-formation.\(^{24}\) Such focus on identity-formation, however, has its limits. Because there were so many possible cults and divinities in the Roman empire, most of which could be combined, it seems likely ‘that most of these choices would have contributed not more to a person’s identity in antiquity than preferences for certain brands of consumer goods do today’.\(^{25}\) Someone may be ‘a coca-cola man’ but it is doubtful that this would be anyone’s primary description of himself. If instead of focusing on notions of identity, one analyses the first *princeps*’ actions in terms of the

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\(^{22}\) Bachrach/ M. S. Baratz, ‘Two faces of power’.


\(^{24}\) Augustus’ measures against Egyptian cult, for instance, have recently been explained Eric Orlin, ‘Octavian and Egyptian Cults: Redrawing the Boundaries of Romanness’, *American Journal Of Philology* 129 (2008), 231-253 as a mode in which the new emperor drew explicit boundaries between inside and outside. Outside of the *pomerium*, foreignness and change were acceptable, but inside the *pomerium* he constructed an apparently traditional, though effectively new, pure form of Romanitas.

mobilisation of bias, it seems apparent that a whole series of measures in Augustus’ early reign can be usefully interpreted as attempts to direct debate away from foreign rites. If so, one could catch a glimpse of the way in which the second face of power could have operated in Roman imperial times.

Of course, Augustus’ emphasis on the restoration of ritual practice post-civil war has been abundantly looked into. Wissowa’s observation that it was ‘mehr ein Neubau als eine Wiederherstellung’ is still regularly adhered to. Yet, Neubau or not, the triumvir and later princeps consistently emphasised the importance of tradition and the examples of archaic Rome in the relationship between men and gods. John Scheid has argued that this consistent emphasis in Augustus’ religious activities amounted to an actual ‘religious policy’ and that this policy was ‘entirely enacted between 43 and 28 BC’, which would see the ban on Egyptian cults as an endpoint of this early phase. This sequence might usefully be seen as some sort of interaction between different faces of power. In the earliest period of imperial rule, first-face measures could be used to create a context in which second-face power could operate.

There was, after all, a noticeable series of imperial measures which emphasised religious traditions. Thus, for instance, fetiales were used to declare war on Cleopatra in 32 BC, coinciding with the restoration of the priesthood and the temple of Jupiter Feretrius. A similar religious innovation which was formulated in the language of tradition was Augustus’ 29 BC restoration, transformation or even innovation of the sodales Titii. Again, we see emphasis on longstanding tradition, in this case the role of Titus Tatius as Romulus’ co-ruler. Likewise, in 29 BC Augustus

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awarded a public grant to the *Frates Arvales* and elevated them to senatorial level.\(^{27}\) Further direct actions from the centre to emphasise the importance of traditional Roman religious notions took place in 28 BC, when Augustus acted as censor. As set out by Suetonius:

He increased the number and importance of the priests, and also their allowances and privileges, in particular those of the Vestal virgins ... He also revived some of the ancient rites which had gradually fallen into disuse, such as the augury of *Salus* the office of *Flamen Dialis*, the ceremonies of the *Lupercalia*, the *Secular Games*, and the festival of the *Compitalia* (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 31.3).

Famously, this was also the year in which Augustus, as described in detail in his *Res Gestae* (20.4) ‘rebuilt in the city eighty-two temples of the gods, omitting none which at that time stood in need of repair’.

These direct central actions emphasising religious tradition took place in the same years in which the young had begun amassing positions within the four traditional priestly colleges, which would later become standard offices for the emperors. Again, one sees an emphasis on Roman traditional practice, which was transmitted through various ‘media’, such as coinage in a variety of denominations, sculptural reliefs and poetry.

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RIC 1² Augustus, 410 (AR Denarius, 3.78 g).

The argument here is not whether the princeps really tried to get back to Republican traditions or whether Wissowa’s Neubau formed a finished facade hiding Augustan innovation. Instead this section attempts to draw attention to the systematic emphasis on traditional religious values, invented or not, broadcast by Augustus in a variety of ways. Returning briefly to the concepts of communication set out above, in this period the direct influence of the ruler seems paramount, answering the ‘by whom’ question. The ‘to whom’ is always difficult, but the variety of media employed, including coins of different denomination (which answers ‘how’ the message was transmitted) suggests that all inhabitants of at least the city of Rome were potential targets of the message.

Would it then be too much to suggest that the aim of this exercise was not solely to place Augustus in a traditional framework, and thus to legitimise his position, but also to make people think about society as a whole, and religion in particular, in a traditional framework? Augustus seems to have had strong personal opinions about religion and was, according to Suetonius, in awe of thunder and lightning and attached great importance to omens and prodigies. If Suetonius is to be further believed, Augustus held religious preference for what he considered ‘Roman’ cults and ‘treated with great respect such foreign rites as were ancient and well established, but held the rest in contempt’. ²⁸ Such personal preferences from the part

²⁸ Suet. Aug. 93, cf. Suet. Aug. 90, 92. For the possibility that Octavian/Augustus acted upon personal beliefs in reacting to omens, and the possible repercussions for his actions regarding the foundation of
of a sole ruler can have major effects on the policy that is pursued in an effective dictatorship. In this interpretation, the various ways, invented or otherwise, in which traditional religion was emphasised, can be seen as a ‘mobilisation of bias’; an attempt to make people not even think about turning to more exotic new religious notions. If this was the case, the attempt was not entirely successful, and more directive ways were needed to reach the aim, as the 28 and 21 BC bans of Egyptian rites make clear.

The above-sketched scenario is of course highly speculative. Yet, this way of analysing events may help us to steer somewhat away from notions of identity-formation and auctoritas, which have dominate the debate. Also, this mode of viewing events also makes it much less problematic that the emperor allowed himself to be depicted as a Pharaoh on Egyptian soil whilst prohibiting Egyptian rites in Rome. The aim was not to mobilise bias in Egypt, but in Rome. Different targets need different messages to exercise power through communication.

*The third face of power*

The third and final face of power was formulated as getting others to have the desires you want them to have. For this mode of exercising power, the reign of Caracalla provides an interesting scenario. His somewhat troubled reign was not only characterised by fraternal blood and violence, but also by a bombardment of messages relating to exotic gods. In fact, two independent recent analyses of the differences between images on central coinage during the joint reign of Severus and Caracalla (AD 198-210) and Caracalla’s sole reign (AD 212-217) show an enormous rise in the Apollo Palatine temple, see O. Hekster/ J.W. Rich, ‘Octavian and the thunderbolt: The temple of Apollo Palatinus and the Roman tradition of temple building’, *The Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006), 149-168.

in the number of coin types emphasising divinities when Caracalla came into sole power.\(^{30}\)

Dividing the coin types in RIC in different ‘representational categories’, the category ‘divine association’ even rises from 18.2% to 66.9%.

Representational categories of central coinage 198-210/ 212-217, by Erika Manders

Importantly, also, there are references to substantial numbers of new gods during Caracalla’s sole reign. During the period of joint rule, Mars and Sol appeared most frequently on coin types from the ‘divine association’ category, with occasional appearances of Minerva, Liber Pater, and Hercules/Melquart. In 212-217, however, Venus, Vesta, Apollo, Diana, Sol, Pluto, Isis, and Serapis are introduced on Caracalla’s coinage. There is also attention to Dea Caelestis, Ceres and the god Elegabal. Isis and Sarapis were not new, one or the other having appeared previously in coins of Domitian, Hadrian, Antoninus, Marcus, and Commodus. Pluto, however, was new, and appears only on Caracalla’s coins.\(^{31}\) This attention to new, especially Eastern, divinities, coincides with epigraphic and literary evidence for a temple to Serapis and temples to Isis at Rome.


\(^{31}\) RIC IV.1, Caracalla, nos 241, 242, 261a), 261b), 261c), 261d), 262a), 262b), 262c), 279, 279A, 542, 555a), 555b), 555c), 560, 569. Cf. Manders, *Coining Images of Power*, 236-240.
This attention to ‘exotic’ divinities coincided with claims about imperial piety. According to Dio (78.16.1), Caracalla was ‘claiming to be the most pious of all mankind’. Similarly, the surviving text of the Constitutio Antoniniana focuses on divine support:

that I render thanks to the immortal gods for preserving me [when that conspiracy occurred], in that way I believe that I should be able [magnificently and reverently] to appropriately respond to their majesty, [if] I were able to lead [all who are now my people] with all others who should join my people [to the temples] of the gods’.\(^{32}\)

Interest in divine support is also suggested by the numerous temples to which the emperor paid visits. With regard to the Near East, imperial visits by Caracalla to the important cult centres at Bambyx-Hierapolis (Mabug) and Doliche (Dülük) have been postulated by Henry Seyrig and Margheritta Facella, and nobody needs to be reminded that the emperor found his somewhat embarrassing end going to (or from) the moon temple at Haran.\(^{33}\)

It is striking how this centralised public attention to imperial piety and exotic cults coincided with the oft-cited ‘eastern religious climate’ of the Severan age. Caracalla’s personal involvement seems clear, since during Severus’ reign only very few ‘exotic’ gods featured on coinage and on reliefs – almost all of them connected to the emperor’s home town of Lepcis Magna, or to Africa more generally.\(^{34}\) One could, continuing the line of argument that this paper has advocated, suggest that the


increasing attention to eastern religions in the third century was at least partly a result of Roman desires which followed this bombardment of attention to the East. By emphasising somewhat alien but not wholly novel deities throughout his reign, Caracalla managed to shape the very wants of a number of his subjects, without forcing them to do so in an Elagabalus-sort of way.  

This is not to say that all attention to the East resulted from Caracalla’s exercising a third face of power. Indeed, the emperor was himself equally part of a cultural framework – if not perhaps a shared field of experience– and reacted to his surroundings and to events and ideas that clearly predated his reign. Yet, it is tempting to speculate that the emperor who issued the Constitutio Antoniniana, and so initiated one of the more spectacular unifying events in Roman history, also helped integration on the way by his systematic attention to exotic divinities to whom he did not connect himself personally.

**Faces of power and anchoring religious change**

Hopefully this paper has shown how theoretical notions of power and communication can help when looking at religious change in the Roman Empire. Like all historical scripts, of course, the three different scenarios that form the core of this paper were written much after the events. They are not suggesting a conscious decision by any of the exemplary emperors to exercise power in one specific way. Rather, by trying to analyse the *ways in which* power was exercised, one may learn something about the *purposes for which* power was exercised.

The three scenarios, of course, followed the three different modes in which power can be exercised. This means that they emphasise differences in Roman imperial involvement in religious change. Yet the three scenarios can be linked by underlying aspects: the importance of a shared field of experience, and the different

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roles played by traditions, either invented or not, to come to ‘common ground’ and understanding. In fact, the importance of such a shared field of experience seems paramount to explain the (lack of) success of imperially encouraged religious change. And crucial for playing into or forging such a shared field of experience is the process of anchoring.

Looking at Bassianus/Elagabalus, it seems clear that the young emperor chose the wrong anchor as a starting point. The black-stone god was emphatically alien, and since mental adjustments remain typically insufficient, his attempt at making the new god understandable for his subjects failed, and with it the religious change he encouraged. It would be interesting to take into account the extent to which Bassianus’ choice for the god Elagabalus resulted from the normality of this god in the young emperor’s hometown Emessa. In other words: for the boy from Emessa, the black stone Elagabalus was anchored in traditional religion, and since (again) mental adjustments remain typically insufficient, it was difficult for the emperor to see quite how alien the conical stone would be for his subjects at Rome. Looking at the second scenario, it appears that Augustus systematically chose traditional anchors and since, once again, adjustments remain typically insufficient, the massive change in society – religious and otherwise – were perceived with this anchor in mind. Caracalla, finally, used acceptable exotic gods as explicit anchors for his religious behaviour, and in so doing he may have boosted their role as points of reference for his subjects.

The apparent paradox between the Roman historical reality of continuously developing religious practices, and the equally continuous importance of maintaining that matters stayed the same, can be solved by looking at the way religious change was communicated. Both the rulers who tried to change religious emphasis and their subjects who tried to understand what was going on, aimed to

anchor situations of major change in known contexts, identifying rather than inventing traditions to understand the situation. Religious changes that were most easily anchored in changing traditions were the most successful ones. People could only accept what they thought they understood.